

Angela Jager, *The Mass Market for History Paintings in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam: Production, Distribution, Consumption*. Amsterdam Studies in the Dutch Golden Age (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020, 294 pp., ISBN 9789462987739).

When thinking of Dutch seventeenth-century painting, its quality rather than its quantity usually springs to mind. Indeed, painters like Rembrandt and Vermeer are still widely known and celebrated for their extraordinary achievements: the lifelikeness and immediacy of their works, the strong suggestion of inner life, the carefully balanced compositions and their confident, characteristic brushwork. However, the sheer number of paintings produced is also unique for this period. Estimates of the total number of paintings produced between 1600 and 1700 vary somewhat, from circa one to ten million paintings, yet it is clear that it was exceptionally high.¹ Foreigners visiting the Netherlands in the seventeenth century were surprised by the number of pictures they encountered. For example, the British writer John Evelyn noted in his diary in 1641 that paintings were very common and cheap in the Netherlands, and that he was amazed by the amount of pictures he saw at the annual fair in Rotterdam (‘especially Landscips and Drolleries as they call these clounish representations’).² Surviving probate inventories confirm the large number of pictures present in almost every building in towns and cities. It is therefore all the more surprising that, until recently, the bulk of the pictures produced, marketed and sold in the Dutch seventeenth century has barely been subject to serious scholarly attention.

Angela Jager’s book *The Mass Market for History Paintings in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam: Production, Distribution, Consumption* is the first in-depth study of the lower segment of the seventeenth-century art market in the Northern Netherlands. It focuses on cheap history paintings (i.e. biblical, mythological or historical scenes) and analyses the market for these pictures based on the inventories of three Amsterdam art dealers: Jan Fransz. Dammeron (1646), Cornelis Doeck (1666/1668) and Hendrick Meijeringh (1687). Together these inventories list over five hundred history paintings in the lowest segment of the market, each with an estimated value of three to five guilders. By contrast, high-end history paintings by Rembrandt, Lievens or Flinck could fetch hundreds and occasionally even more than a thousand guilders in this period. Jager’s carefully executed study makes a welcome contribution to our understanding of the booming seventeenth-century art market and yields a number of surprising new insights.

At the beginning of the century, cheap Flemish pictures flooded the Dutch market, much to the annoyance of local painters who appealed for

new guild regulations in almost every major Dutch city. Soon, however, the production of cheap pictures greatly expanded in the Northern Netherlands as well. Understandably, seventeenth-century art experts looked down upon the quality of these works. For example, Rembrandt's pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten mentioned the large number of cheap history paintings ('a dime a dozen') circulating in his days and stressed that in order to achieve a good level of quality, history painters had to do more than 'assemble heads and bodies'.³ The painter and art theorist Arnold Houbraken was even more dismissive at the end of the century when distinguishing between specialists and their low-end equivalents: 'History painters (aside from the bunglers and duds who are driven by profit alone)'.⁴ While the quality of these pictures obviously fell short compared to the works by leading artists, from a quantitative perspective, the importance of cheap history paintings is undeniable.

Jager convincingly shows that history paintings were the most popular type of mass-produced paintings in the extensive inventories of these three Amsterdam art dealers. While it is commonly assumed that history paintings became less popular toward the end of the century, this trend apparently does not apply to the cheaper segment. Moreover, the favourite topics and designs of these pictures differ from their more expensive counterparts. Although it is often assumed that the bulk of paintings, especially the cheaper ones, have not survived, Jager matched the descriptions from the dealers' inventories with specific surviving pictures and picture types, allowing her to analyse their characteristics. These mass-produced paintings generally have clear and unambiguous narratives, much like book illustrations. Furthermore, these mostly depict 'exciting' subjects from the Old Testament such as stories about sacrifices, betrayal, adultery, imprisonment and remorse, which are underscored by exaggerated gestures of secondary figures. High-end history paintings, by contrast, tend to focus on the emotions of the main protagonist. For reasons of cost efficiency all the topics were depicted repeatedly, often in different standard formats, and compositions were occasionally reused to depict a similar biblical story.

1 Bert Biemans, *Een schatting van het aantal schilderijen dat in de zeventiende eeuw in de Republiek is gemaakt* (MA thesis; University of Amsterdam 2007); Ad van der Woude, 'The Volume and Value of Paintings in Holland at the Time of the Dutch Republic', in: David Freedberg and Jan De Vries (eds.), *Art in History, History in Art: Studies in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Culture* (Santa Monica 1991) 285-331; John Michael Montias, 'Estimates of the number of Dutch

master-painters, their earnings and their output in 1650', *Leidschrift* 6:3 (1990) 59-74.

2 John Evelyn, *Memoirs of John Evelyn (...) comprising his Dairy of 1641-1705-6* (London 1827) 25.

3 Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst: anders de zichtbaere werelt* (Rotterdam 1678) 87.

4 Arnold Houbraken, *De groote Schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen (...)*, III (The Hague 1718-1721) 168.

Other interesting conclusions by Jager concern the materials used and artists' signatures. Contrary to the cheap pictures produced in Antwerp, Jager found no evidence of the use of cheaper materials. Admittedly, much research remains to be done in this respect; the specific pigments used have not been analysed yet and it seems highly unlikely that technical research will reveal expensive pigments such as lapis lazuli (blue) or vermillion (red) in the cheap works. Yet it is noteworthy, as Jager remarks, that even lower-priced paintings were executed on good quality oak panels and that there is no evidence thus far of the use of watercolour for inexpensive pictures in the Northern Netherlands, the preferred medium for cheap pictures in Antwerp. Also striking is the presence of signatures on many cheap works by artists who do not seem to have enjoyed a good reputation; low-priced pictures in Antwerp were as a rule unsigned.

Although Jager does not offer an explanation for the signatures, she does note that more than half of the history paintings in Amsterdam's wealthiest households were valued under five guilders (245) and that 'a dime a dozen' history paintings were valued between a few stivers and five guilders (26). It therefore seems likely that the 'dime a dozen' paintings in the stock of the three Amsterdam dealers she studied were of relatively good quality for cheap paintings, as these were estimated to be worth between three to five guilders each. Furthermore, it is probable that the buyers of such paintings consisted partly of the same clientele who bought more high-end paintings, which were occasionally available in the same store. If these cheaper pictures ended up in the same collections as more expensive works, in part similar standards might have applied, including a preference for signed originals.

In short, Jager offers a much needed correction to our understanding of the Dutch seventeenth-century painting by giving us a first extensive insight into the cheaper segment of the market. Her thoughtful study raises further questions, which she will partially embark to answer in the near future: Jager recently obtained a grant together with Professor Emeritus Jorgen Wadum for a comprehensive study of the seventeenth-century export of cheap Dutch paintings to Denmark including technical analyses. Hopefully, she and other scholars will also look into other types of mass-produced paintings. In particular, a study of the cheap 'drolleries' (humorous pictures) would be interesting for further research. A rough inventory of seventeenth-century humorous pictures compiled in the context of the exhibition *The Art of Laughter* (2017-2018) in the Frans Hals Museum indicates that many such cheaper paintings have survived and it would be fascinating to know to what extent their humour differed from high-end works.⁵

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5 Anna Tummers, Elmer Kolfin and Jasper Hillegers (eds.), *The Art of Laughter: Humour in the Dutch Golden Age* (Haarlem/Zwolle 2017) 13.